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# 'We are ignored rather than attacked politically'. Youth participation in regional sustainability transformation in eastern Germany

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of Germany's coal phase-out, substantial resources are allocated to transform coal regions economically and socially. This study examines the opportunities and aspirations of young people in shaping local spaces, focusing on four participatory processes in Lusatia, eastern Germany. Utilising document analysis and 17 interviews with youth service workers, participants, and politicians, the study combines Massey, Doreen. 2005. *For Space*. London: Sage concept of space with Cahill, Helen, and Babak Dadvand. 2018. "Re-conceptualising Youth Participation: A Framework to Inform Action." *Children and Youth Services Review* 95:243–253 model for youth participation. It bridges the gap between young people's goals and motivations and the quality of participation formats, with a regional focus. Findings reveal that young people's aspirations align with adult-developed projects in transport, digital and business infrastructure, energy transition, and technology, but youth advocate for a more ambitious ecological transformation, digital solutions, and democratic decision-making. Despite well-designed participatory programmes demonstrating youth ability to contribute to transformation, their ideas are often publicly praised but rarely integrated into political decisions due to inadequate procedures. Some formats allowed youth to reposition themselves, highlighting the fluidity of power. The study calls for further research on youth participation from a spatial perspective, and emphasizes the need to better prepare young participants and policymakers to manage expectations and responsibilities in participatory processes.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Space; place-based; youth participation; coal exit; participation model; cultures of sustainability

## 1. Introduction

To mitigate climate change, the German government has decided to phase out coal by 2038 at the latest, ceasing coal mining and closing coal-fired power plants. Substantial public funding, unparalleled globally, has been allocated to facilitate comprehensive regional transformations (Diluiso et al. 2021). Consequently, the coal phase-out presents both challenges and opportunities for affected regions. This entails negotiations on the physical appearance of specific sites such as opencast pits, infrastructures, and rural landscapes, as well as the conceptualisation of regional identities (Massey 2005). This paper examines various participation formats created to enable the participation of young people in these negotiation processes.

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The involvement of young people in these negotiations is justified on various grounds: The consequences of the coal phase-out are long term, thereby affecting younger persons longer than the current adult population. Youth involvement is also necessary to identify inter-generational conflicts and jointly develop equitable solutions (Thew, Middlemiss, and Paavola 2022). Various youth studies, and especially the Fridays for Future movement, show that many young people are very interested in environmental and sustainability issues and greatly concerned about climate change specifically (e.g. in Germany almost three-quarters of youth name pollution as the main problem that frightens them, and 65% name climate change, cf. Albert, Hurrelmann, and Quenzel 2019). Several studies indicate that youth participation increases the quality of decisions and the underlying knowledge base (Frank 2006), contributes to a fair balance, and enhances actors' self-esteem and self-efficacy (Checkoway 2011; To and Liu 2021). This also increases the legitimacy and transparency of decision-making processes (Beierle and Cayford 2002) and fosters acceptance in the long run. However, there are also obstacles to youth participation, particularly adults who do not believe that young people are able to contribute (Augsberger, Collins, and Gecker 2017). Furthermore, involving (young) people is generally challenging, particularly in disadvantaged communities (Severcan 2015) or involving groups from lower income or educational backgrounds (Checkoway 2011).

The present study examines four programmes for youth participation in Lusatia, a rural region of eastern Germany spanning the states of Brandenburg and Saxony, which has a long history of lignite mining. It explores the opportunities and aspirations of young people in shaping local spaces amidst the ongoing transformation. This research holds significance for addressing intergenerational justice concerns and navigating demographic shifts in rural areas, particularly given Lusatia's ageing population. The outcomes of current structural policy decisions are pivotal in influencing whether young individuals migrate to, remain in, or leave Lusatia in the future (Gürtler, Luh, and Staemmler 2020; Heidig and Bischoff 2021).

The study employs document analysis and 17 semi-structured interviews with youth service workers, youth participants, and politicians. Uniquely, our analytical framework combines two approaches: Massey's (2005) notion of space, which explores on a macro level young people's idea about the design of places and spaces within economic, political, and intergenerational power relations; and the P7 model for youth participation by Cahill and Dadvand (2018), which examines the dynamics of youth engagement. Previous studies have typically focused on the local level or single programmes, whereas we investigate youth participation at the regional level. The regional level presents distinct challenges, as problems are less directly linked to the immediate lives of young people and involve a greater diversity of relevant stakeholders.

The subsequent section outlines our analytical approach. We then introduce our cases and research design. Thereafter, the Results and Discussion sections examine how programmes are designed and implemented, the influence of power, specific contexts, and the programmes' contributions to regional transformation. Section 6 concludes.

## 2. Studying the specifics of youth participation formats and their contexts

With reference to the cultural geographer Doreen Massey (2005), we understand regional transformations as relationally-shaped negotiation processes around *place* and *space*, between politics, civil society, economics, and citizens in the region and beyond. Youth participation can be a way for young people to influence these negotiations. In this section, we will introduce Massey's concept of space and place, and the P7 youth participation model of Cahill and Dadvand (2018). We also describe how we operationalise both concepts as our analytical approach to study different youth participation processes in Lusatia.

For Massey, *space and place* are both socially constructed and interwoven (Massey 2005). Space, shaped by diverse social interactions and identities, is constantly evolving, presenting opportunities for transformation. It is inevitably characterised by heterogeneity: 'Without space, no multiplicity;

without multiplicity, no space' (Massey 2005, 9). This in turn means that *space* can never be regarded as closed, but is in a constant process of change and renewal – 'under construction' (Massey 2005, 9). Therefore, spaces are open to the future. Transforming their design is a political and social task (Massey 2009, 17). Place, on the other hand, represents the local experience of space, with intersecting identities contributing to the sense of place (Massey 1991).

Regional transformation processes conceptualised as space reveal in a special way the overlapping of different identities, which can be seen locally in the concrete development and transformation of places. In the context of Lusatia, the coal industry has historically shaped the region's identity, with coal mines serving as physical manifestations of place. The overlapping of identities is exemplified by the villages that were evacuated and demolished to make way for these mines. They can no longer be experienced spatially, but have inscribed themselves in the place and form place as well. Lusatia is currently experiencing major transformations as part of the coal phase-out. Supported by many funding programmes, the focus of the transformation process is not on the coal mines, but on the creation of new places and visions for the region as a whole. In this regard, youth participation is a way of integrating young people's perspectives.

Even prior to the launch of a (political) participation initiative, various decisions are taken that can influence its outcomes. These include, among other things, defining the object of participation, clarifying its purpose, determining the type of participation, and establishing procedures for handling the results. In this context, Massey's (2005) approach of power geometry is instrumental in understanding how power dynamics shape the openness of spaces for youth participation.

Massey's concepts provide a framework for analysing the context and impact of youth participation formats. The effectiveness of such formats depends on their organisation and implementation. To assess this, we utilise the 7P model for youth participation developed by Cahill and Dadvand (2018). In contrast to other models of youth participation, it takes into account the dynamic nature of participation and jointly considers structure, agency, and power. It encompasses seven interrelated domains (7Ps): purpose, positioning, perspective, power relations, protection, place, and process. The model was developed for the design of participation formats. In our study, we adapt these dimensions for scientific analysis as follows:

- *Purpose: Examining the reasons for creating a format and assessing whether it achieves its goals.* Purpose matters, as it is the end to which a youth participation format should contribute as a means. Purpose can involve substantive objectives, e.g. to deliver better results, but also procedural goals such as fostering legitimacy or acceptance.
- *Positioning: Investigating how young people are perceived by adults and how they position others within the programme* (Cahill and Dadvand 2018; Cammaerts et al. 2016). On the one hand, positioning refers to long-standing cultural narratives, in particular what young people are believed to be capable of and what is expected of them. On the other hand, it is also a dynamic category, as repositioning can occur in processes, e.g. when young people adapt their understanding of their role. Positioning has a significant influence on young people's self-perception, sense of agency, and empowerment within the social geographies of their everyday spaces.
- *Perspective: Analysing whose voices are included or excluded in the programme, and efforts to promote diverse perspectives, considering participants' socio-economic status, education, ethnicity, and disability* (Black 2011). The category of perspective helps to understand whether existing inequalities are reproduced in participatory processes.
- *Power relations: Studying the internal distribution of power among participants, particularly dynamics among young people and between young people and facilitators.* This can reveal whether certain individuals or networks dominate a process or are subordinate.
- *Protection: Assessing measures to safeguard young people's political, social, and material access and safety, particularly against discrimination and violence.* This is important in itself and can also indicate whether people feel secure in expressing their opinions, and about the atmosphere in which a format takes place.

- *Process: Analysing the design and duration of participation formats, their contribution to young people's ability to develop and express ideas, and whether they are suitable for reaching their intended goals.* The process design has implications for the knowledge that can be generated, for actor relations, and for participatory opportunities (Cahill 2010).
- *Place: Considering geographical, historical, social, and political context, the location and timing of participation formats and their implications for youth engagement.* Studying place can help to understand young people's 'geographies of belonging' (Dadvand and Cuervo 2019), how the location of a process influences its outcomes, and to compare cases.

Table 1 outlines the dimensions of our analysis and the corresponding questions used to study each dimension, providing a comprehensive framework for assessing youth participation in regional transformations. For analytical reasons, we differentiate between internal dimensions, which include everything that belongs to the format itself, versus external dimensions, which go beyond the format itself and take into account the wider context that influences the format and on which it has an impact.

### 3. Geographical context of Lusatia and details of four selected cases

The study region of Lusatia faces similar challenges of socio-ecological transformation to those of other regions, but in a particularly acute way. The economic importance of lignite is greater than in the other German coalfield areas (BMW 2019). Coal has high significance for regional identity, and the negative experiences of Germany's post-reunification transformation period persist (Gürtler, Luh, and Staemmler 2020). With the Investment Law for Coal Regions (Investitionsgesetz Kohleregionen, InvKG) and the Structural Strengthening Act for Coal Regions (Strukturstärkungsgesetz Kohleregionen), the federal government has dedicated 17 billion Euros to Lusatia as structural aid in addition to compensations for coal producers and welfare benefits for laid-off workers. One aim is also to make the region more attractive to young people in order to counteract demographic change. Surveys show high willingness among young people to emigrate from Lusatia (Heidig and Bischoff 2021). This is also a motivation for the various youth participation processes in the region. We researched four formats of youth participation which aim to contribute to a regional transformation towards sustainability. We describe them in the following.

The 'Planathon – Youth Shapes Structural Change' (12–14 Nov., 2021) is a structured participation process initiated by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth together with the governments of those states with coal-dependent regions (Jugendredaktion 2022). For three days, around 40 young people (self-selected, aged 16–27)

**Table 1.** Analytical categories adapted from Cahill and Dadvand (2018) and Massey (2005).

	Dimensions	Analytical question
External dimensions	Place – E	How are places shaped through youth participation?
	Power geometry	How did power relations influence the design of the participation format and the implementation of its results?
	Space	What visions do young people have for their region?
Internal Dimensions	Purpose	Why was the format created and did it achieve its aims?
	Positioning	How are young people positioned within the programme itself, and how do they in turn position others?
	Perspectives	Who participated in the formats and what was done to reach groups that are usually underrepresented? (e.g. in terms of socio-economic status, educational and ethnic background, and living place)?
	Power relations	How was power distributed between the actors within the formats?
	Protection	What measures were taken to secure access and safety for young people?
	Process	What kinds of participatory opportunities were fostered by the process design?
	Place – I	How did physical, historical, social, and political contexts influence the formats?

developed concrete ideas for the three coal regions involved. Afterwards, a youth editorial team drew up a youth report, which was presented to the four state governments in 2022. There are plans to hold further planathons in the future.

The three-year project 'RevierUPGRADE. We. Now. Sustainable' (**RUP**) is a joint project by the Independent Institute for Environmental Issues and the youth NGO BUNDjugend. It is funded by the Federal Ministry for the Environment and started in spring 2023. The programme aims to foster social-ecological transformation by education, involvement, and coaching (UfU 2024).

**#MISSION2038** is a lifeworld-oriented model project by the Competence Center for Child and Youth Participation Brandenburg, the Saxony Ministry for Social Affairs and Social Cohesion, the Service Agency for Child and Youth Participation, and German Children and Youth Foundation Saxony (DKJS). It was established in 2019 and is specifically dedicated to youth participation in structural change. In **#MISSION2038**, young people (aged 12–24) are informed about structural change, and develop their own project ideas in the local context; they then vote on a couple of project ideas to be accompanied and financially supported (€1000–2000).

The Youth Forum on Sustainability (**JuFoNa**) is an advocacy group for young people in the state of Brandenburg that lobbies for youth participation in sustainability at the state level. JuFoNa is funded by Brandenburg's state Ministry of Agriculture, Environment, and Climate Protection and Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports. JuFoNa's activities include stakeholder participation in the Brandenburg Climate Plan.

#### 4. Materials and methods

The present study uses regional case studies from Lusatia to evaluate whether and how four participatory formats enabled young people to take part in negotiations concerning space and place within regional transformation processes. The methodology draws upon a mixture of materials, including in particular 17 semi-structured interviews, complemented by legal documents and reports on structural change and youth participation processes. The analysis focuses on four processes: **#MISSION2038**, Planathon, RUP and JuFoNa. We have chosen four formats that differ in terms of objectives (should young people be involved in decision-making or instead be activated) and the intrinsic or extrinsic motivations associated with them, to represent a range of different formats for child and youth participation in structural change (see Figure 1). In addition, the selected cases are the four largest and best-known youth participation initiatives associated with Lusatia's transformation process. In terms of triangulation, the four cases enable us to link together the theories of Cahill and Dadvand (2018) and Massey (2005) on a broader empirical basis and to develop ideas towards a spatial view of youth participation processes.

The original data derive from 17 semi-structured interviews with youth service workers, youth participants, and politicians who initiated, accompanied, or participated in the four processes examined (see Appendix A1 for more details). The range of interviewees reflects the four cases and was chosen to obtain a comprehensive overview of the programmes and potentially contrasting perspectives. The interview guide (see Appendix A2) drew on theoretical assumptions and questions of Cahill and Dadvand (2018) as well as Massey (2005). We conducted most of the interviews (11 out of 17) with organisers and youth service workers. This ensured a detailed understanding of the formats themselves, and provided important information and impressions of the actual process – the place of youth participation and its inner logics: how different perspectives of young people were heard, how young people were protected, and how the process was designed. We spoke both with youth service workers who designed and implemented the processes and were thus able to provide concrete insights, and with youth service workers who were not directly involved and were able to compare and reflect on the different formats. To get an overview of the political motivation for youth participation in Lusatia and the wider background of structural change – the space to which youth aim to contribute, we spoke to two politicians in Brandenburg and one in Saxony. Our main aim here was to more closely examine how they perceive the purpose of youth participation in

	<i>Objectives</i>	
	<i>Consideration of young people's interests and needs in decision-making</i>	<i>Spark young people's interest in events and the community</i>
<i>Top-down principle (extrinsic motivation)</i>	<b>Participation</b> (e.g. Planathon)	<b>(political) Education</b> (e.g. RUP)
<i>Bottom-up principle (intrinsic motivation)</i>	<b>Advocacy</b> (e.g. JuFoNa)	<b>(voluntary) Commitment</b> (e.g. #MISSION2038)

**Figure 1.** Different formats of youth participation for sustainability in Lusatia. Based on Ringler and Grebe (2023); authors' translation.

shaping space. We also gained a better understanding of the political power dynamics or power geometry (Massey 2005) within which youth participation processes operate. Unfortunately, we were only able to speak to two young people who participated at the Planathon and one participant of #MISSION 2038. We attempted to obtain more interviews with young people from Planathon and #MISSION 2038, but were not successful. RUP had not yet started at the time of the analysis, and JuFoNa itself is initiated by youths, so that the organisers are also the participating youths. The youths gave us both insights into how they experienced the concrete place of participation (micro – and meso-level) and how the process enabled them to shape place and space in regional transformation (meso – and macro-level).

The interviews underwent content analysis according to Mayring (2014). In a first step, all interviews were analysed via the analytical questions presented in Table 1. At the same time, new categories were developed inductively. A second step checked how the newly developed categories can be catalysed and how they relate to theory-guided analytical mode. In a third step, the extended categories were finalised and used to analyse all the material. Definitions and examples of the extended categories are provided in Appendix A3.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Place – E

The four formats address different dimensions of physical place. Planathon aims for regional and cross-regional exchanges among young people, whereas JuFoNa focuses exclusively on Brandenburg, and #MISSION2038 has a local focus. RUP employs a mixed approach, operating supraregionally in the states of Brandenburg, Saxony, and Saxony-Anhalt, while supporting young people in their local contexts.

Participants in #MISSION2038 have developed and realised a wide range of projects, many of which create or expand places that meet young people's needs for social interaction and personal retreat. For example, a youth club has been established in a converted construction trailer, and a Youth City Council has been created to amplify young people's voices in decision making (Interview P).

Planathon's participants proposed project ideas for the broader structural change process, with a particular focus on transport, urban development, and tourism. These proposals include expanding cycle paths, creating affordable housing, and developing conference hotels and leisure parks, as well as manifold measures to support the energy transition. They also suggest repurposing existing infrastructure, such as using vacant buildings for housing or converting coal mines into renewable energy sites or event locations. Several proposals target the expansion of participatory structures, such as establishing a Climate Council and a Youth Participation Strategy. Marginalised positions are supported through initiatives like the creation of an LGBTQIA + youth centre and promoting intercultural exchange. There is a broad range of digital project proposals, such as apps that provide a bundled overview of mobility services and volunteering opportunities, as well as e-medical services, linking physical places with digital spaces (cf. Jugendgutachten 2022).

## 5.2. Space

Evidence from JuFoNa, #MISSION2038, and Planathon demonstrates that young people have concrete visions for their future in the region. Participants in Planathon gathered political visions and project ideas. These focused on improving the quality of life, aiming for a region in which 'people and nature are in harmony', there is well-developed, free public transport, and in which digital infrastructures and services are significantly expanded. They also want to promote democratic decision making and participation and a region where people in need can find refuge. Other priorities included the expansion of leisure facilities and tourism, supporting creative economic models, and advancing research.

Despite the differences in the scope of visions between #MISSION2038 and the Planathon, both formats emphasise the importance of social infrastructure for young people and inclusion. Both Planathon and JuFoNa highlight the importance of climate and environmental protection and biodiversity to young people. However, JuFoNa presents more radical proposals for a transformation towards sustainability, which would involve quite different lifestyles.

I sense that adults in the midst of their careers are focused on maintaining their prosperity and are resistant to change. While they express concern about preserving the climate, they are hesitant to embrace significant changes in the present. Conversely, young people are forward-thinking, recognising the less-than-promising outlook for the future. They aspire to coexist peacefully and are actively exploring ways to make this vision a reality. (Interview A; authors' translation).

## 5.3. Power geometry

Both in the Planathon and JuFoNa, participants had expected that their ideas would be discussed by the decision-making bodies. However, this hope was dashed. The structure of the Planathon was closely aligned with established laws and policies, with the aim of generating ideas that can be implemented within those existing frameworks. However, several structural elements made it unlikely that the youth proposals would be realised. The Planathon involved representatives of federal and state government. However, in the governance structure for structural change, it is mainly municipalities that consider ideas and propose projects; Nevertheless, they were hardly included in the process. To date (May 2024) the state governments have not even taken an official position on the project proposals.

Similarly, in the stakeholder process for the Brandenburg Climate Plan, members of JuFoNa were not given an opportunity to discuss the goals of the climate policy, which is JuFoNa's core topic:

The state government's greenhouse gas reduction targets are, of course, not sufficient and although we constantly pushed for a discussion of targets, no space was given for such discussions (Interview B; authors' translation).



JuFoNa is highly dependent on political power constellations, as it is funded by two ministries; If political majorities change, this might well affect its resources and political access.

The initiators of #MISSION 2038 were denied an opportunity to integrate the programme into the political process on structural change. For a long time, the programme was financed by the state Ministry of Social Affairs – not the Ministry for Regional Development which steers the process of structural change. However, the regional ministry is currently creating projects with the initiators of #MISSION2038. The ministry hopes that youth participation can make the region more attractive for young people, as Lusatia has one of the oldest populations in Germany.

#### 5.4. Purpose

All four formats aim to integrate youth perspectives into the process of structural change in Lusatia, but differ in their specific objectives and the degree to which their purposes have been achieved.

Planathon aimed to create project proposals that could be funded through existing schemes. This was only partially achieved: Many high-quality project proposals have been developed; However, the format lacked a structure to mandate local and state officials to at least consider the youth proposals (see section on power geometry above for details). The organisers additionally point out that Planathon should demonstrate that young people can make ‘competent, serious proposals [...] on complex topics such as structural change [...] and that youth participation [therefore] becomes more important’ (Interview C) in this process. This second objective has clearly been achieved: Politicians praised the quality of the proposals (Interview L) and, shortly after the Planathon, the federal and regional governments decided to strengthen youth participation in the regions (Bund-Länder-Koordinierungsgremium 2022). This decision cannot be solely attributed to Planathon, but since the project organisers contributed to the related decision-making process (Interview C) it is very likely that its outcomes influenced the decision.

The main purpose of #MISSION2038 is for young people to develop and implement small projects for structural change. Several dozen projects show that this goal has been achieved.

RUP aims to encourage young people from Germany’s eastern coal regions to contribute to an ecological transformation:

The primary goal of the project is an ESD [education for sustainable development] approach: (I) recognise connections – What does sustainable structural change mean, what could a sustainable future look like locally? (II) open up different perspectives and discourses, (III) bring youth participation into ongoing political processes. The project thus pursues an educational approach combined with an empowerment approach (Interview B; authors’ translation).

It is too early to tell whether this goal will be reached. JuFoNa aims to embed youth participation for sustainability at the state level and to lobby for an ecological transformation. It has succeeded in becoming a key stakeholder that politicians consult on sustainability issues.

#### 5.5. Positioning

In Planathon, young people were asked to develop project proposals for their peer group during a single workshop. There were no prerequisites for participation. In contrast, JuFoNa looks for individuals who already have a strong command of state environmental policy or are eager to learn about it. JuFoNa aims to build long-term relations with politicians.

In both JuFoNa and the Planathon, young people have opportunities for direct exchange with high-level politicians. However, while their claims to participation are accommodated, they perceive that their substantive demands are not discussed.

Those who talk to us the most are the Greens and the Left. But we have also had talks with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Christian Democratic Party (CDU), (...). No obstacles are put in our way. We have some kind of puppy protection. We are ignored rather than attacked politically. (Interview A; authors’ translation).

While participants in the Planathon report positively on their treatment by politicians and bureaucrats during the process, they felt subordinated when presenting their results to the government.

[The prime minister] just said empty slogans like: 'How nice that the youth is getting involved, that's great'. And then I said: 'Yes, but if you haven't read the proposals, there's no point in proceeding'. [...] And then the prime minister: 'Then you first must convince me that reading the report is worthwhile.' (Interview D; authors' translation)

The quotations illustrate forms of adultism within Planathon and JuFoNa. However, in both programmes, young people were able to reposition themselves. JuFoNa successfully lobbied to cross the dividing line between young people and adults, by becoming part of the regular stakeholder process for the climate plan rather than having a separate programme for young people. As part of the Planathon, young people insisted on 'follow-up meetings after the press conference, in which we discuss technical and substantive views' (Interview D). So far, politicians have not taken decisions on the proposals, but the process is ongoing and has at least raised awareness.

Regarding the positioning of other actors, including other stakeholders in the participatory process for the Brandenburg climate plan, JuFoNa members feel that only young people can really contribute to a (sustainability) transformation, as older age groups are already too accustomed to their current lifestyles.

For RUP and #MISSION2038, the positioning through and of adults play a lesser role. By developing their own projects and participating in educational processes, young people mainly interact among themselves accompanied by youth workers, but less so with other adults.

### 5.6. Perspectives

Diversity and difference were considered in the design of all four programmes, but have proven to be major challenges during implementation. The programmes primarily involved young people who were already engaged with political or sustainability issues. Policy makers expressed scepticism of youth participation processes in general, as they felt that too few young people participated, leading to a lack of diversity of positions.

The Planathon invited all interested people aged 16–27 to participate (self-selection), but the project's socio-economic data showed that: The proportion of students and pupils was significantly higher than that of trainees or professionals; there were more male than female participants; views spanned a broad political spectrum, but few disadvantaged youths participated. The organisers attribute this to the complexity of the topic of 'structural change' and the limited resources for recruitment:

We sent information to schools, universities, and youth centres with the aim of reaching other target groups. But if you look at the data, we mainly reached committed people, but 'disadvantaged groups' less. [...] There are always solutions, [...] but you need more money, more staff, more time. (Interview C; authors' translation).

#MISSION2038 conducted the most extensive recruitment. Youth workers toured the region for months, aiming to also reach people who had not previously been involved. Nonetheless, the organisers self-critically reflect that the majority of young people who participated were already engaged. Representative data are lacking.

JuFoNa does not claim to be representative, but mainly involves individuals from climate and environmental associations. JuFoNa acknowledges that participation in the group requires considerable expertise, which can be a barrier to potential new members.

One part of the RUP programme also targets people active in environmental movements, and the other is concerned with outreach work. As RUP is still in the process of being established, little can be said about its inclusivity.

Most agencies aim to recruit participants from the indigenous Sorbian minority group throughout the areas of Lusatia located in Saxony and Brandenburg, but there is no concrete implementation of such aims in any of the programmes to date.

### 5.7. Power relations

Planathon's self-selection process, combined with the presence of many high-profile politicians and institutions, mainly attracted young people from two different groups: the 'Young Economy Club', which lobbies for closer connections between economic actors and schools; and the youth climate movement 'Fridays for Future'. Participants from these groups reported that they constantly interacted during the meeting via online messaging groups, to push their agendas. The organisers attempted to counteract such power concentrations by using methods that aimed to capture all ideas. Some participants criticised others who they felt lacked connections with the region and its challenges.

Even people who have nothing to do with structural change, who came from regions where this was not an issue at all, but who simply said: There we can present ourselves as a Young Economy Club, can express ourselves. (Interview D; authors' translation).

RUP and JuFoNa mainly involve people from environmental groups. Within the consensus on the need for a quick transformation towards sustainability, participants may define the specifics of the programme without interference from the outside, e.g. how and where JuFoNa should be active; or the form of RUP's workshop and coaching process. Similarly, in #MISSION 2038, young people were free to develop their individual projects within budgetary constraints.

JuFoNa operates on consensus-based decision making, and members report few conflicts within the group.

### 5.8. Protection

The mental, social, and physical security of young people was addressed in all four formats. However, there is no empirical evidence on whether the participants perceived these efforts as sufficient or helpful. Since the formats pursued distinct purposes and differed accordingly in terms of process, the scope of the protective measures varied. The most comprehensive protection concept was applied at the Planathon. The young people, together with the organisers, developed a protection concept that prohibited any discrimination or harassment, and included a representative of the moderation team who could be contacted confidentially. To protect participants from financial burdens, travel and accommodation costs were reimbursed. However, the participants were not reimbursed directly and had to wait a relatively long time, which presents a high hurdle, especially for young people from financially weaker families.

JuFoNa and RUP lack protection concepts but are guided by a discrimination-sensitive approach. Regarding participation in the Brandenburg Climate Plan, JuFoNa praise that attendance costs were covered. However, they complain that the ministry often distributed information only on the preceding evening, thereby preventing young people from preparing appropriately. In addition, meetings took place during the day, usually at the same time as school or university commitments.

Frustrations are exacerbated if a programme does not reflect the needs of young people:

The stakeholder processes took place from 09:00–18:00 hr most of the time, and only two hours of that were set aside for discussions. [...] It was a black box: What is now included in the scientific opinion on the climate plan and what is not. [...] This non-discussion of the objective frustrated us the most. (Interview A; authors' translation).

Nevertheless, the same participant concludes: 'It's cool that we're not alone, but a group of people who all do something. It would be even worse if I couldn't do anything' (Interview A; authors' translation).

Regarding the right to participation, Germany has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Consequently, all political levels (federal, state, and local) are required to enable effective and direct participation of children within the structural change process in Lusatia (Löw Beer et al. 2021). In addition, the municipal regulations in Saxony (§47a) state that 'the municipality shall

involve children and young people in an appropriate manner in planning and projects that affect their interests' (authors' translation). §18a of the Brandenburg Municipal Constitution even states that children and young people *must* be involved in all matters that affect them. However, in practice, young people are hardly involved in issues concerning structural change; and, if so, only indirectly through deputised adults.

### 5.9. Place

Lusatia is characterised as a peripheral (Eder 2019), old-industrial region (Hudson 1994) with limited accessibility (particularly rail infrastructure) and a population density less than half the German average (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023). The region has slightly fewer young people than the national average (17% under 20 years compared to 19% nationwide) (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023). The working-age population (15–65) decreased by 26% from 1995 to 2015 and is expected to continue declining. GDP per employee is slightly higher, and unemployment rates are slightly lower than the eastern German average, but there are significant differences between counties (Seibert et al. 2018). Politically, the right-wing extremist AfD (Alternative for Germany) party leads in the region's polls and is also popular among young people. Due to the shorter history of democracy in eastern Germany, there are fewer local youth participation structures compared to western regions (Interview Q).

In 2019, 49% of respondents in Lusatia opposed the coal phase-out (Heidig and Bischoff 2020), which was significantly higher than in other German federal states. Historically, coal was the core economic activity, but about 90% of coal industry jobs were cut in the early 1990s following German reunification. Today, Lusatia has a more diversified economy but low innovation rates (BMW 2019).

The Planathon and #MISSION2038 involved gathering young people for a weekend or a day within the coal region, while RUP aims to engage people where they live or are active. JuFoNa operates primarily from the state capital of Potsdam.

### 5.10. Process

The four formats mostly employ group processes that focus on collecting, clustering, and elaborating individual ideas. The aims differ fundamentally in that they tend to be either *policy* – (Planathon and JuFoNa) or *lifeworld*-oriented (#MISSION2038 and RUP). The programmes also differ in their time frames: RUP, and particularly Planathon, were designed as singular processes, whereas #MISSION2038 and JuFoNa are designed to continue until (ecological) structural change is achieved.

All the programmes employ a sophisticated combination of methods. Since space is limited, we will focus on Planathon, which has been particularly ambitious in this respect. Planathon aimed to connect the everyday life experiences of participants to the highly complex topic of structural change. It started with a complaint phase (taken from the *future workshop* method of Jungk and Müllert (1993)), which sought to identify all the problems that young people perceive in structural change. The approach used elements from a hackathon format (Briscoe and Mulligan 2014) to facilitate free-thinking and open discussion, and from a Planungszelle (citizens' planning-cell, but without random selection) (Dienel 2002) to formulate recommendations. Participants mainly worked in (small) groups, sometimes divided according to federal states. Planathon used the meta-plan-oriented method 'VIPP – Visualisation in Participatory Programmes', which is specifically geared to the needs of children and adolescents, and as a means to prevent opinion leadership (Stange et al. 2020). An editorial group of volunteers from the large group worked with the organisers on a report that included overarching recommendations. A bureaucrat checked all projects for their feasibility under the Investment Law for Coal Regions (InvKG). Some participants objected that the findings of the complaint phase (particularly that the coal phase-out will happen too late) were not taken up during the workshop.

Well, I had the feeling that it was always dismissed in a ‘yes-we’ll-clear-that-up-later way’, or that the youth editorial team would do it. [...] There was also no active solution that had been seen, how to get this done, so to speak, how to get a consensus there, because in the end you would have had to vote somehow. (Interview D; authors’ translation).

Overall, Planathon was focused on – and successful in generating – implementable ideas. However, it was not designed for ‘an ongoing conversation’ (Clark 2001) between young people and decision makers.

Across the four programmes, all interviewed participants were generally content with the methods applied and the results achieved. They feel empowered; Satisfaction levels were higher for the processes designed by young people themselves, as they had greater liberty in deciding what topics to cover (Clark 2001).

Prior to the stakeholder participation process for the Brandenburg Climate Plan, JuFoNa organised a two-day workshop to prepare the topics and associated demands. Fifty young people took part (self-selection). One year later, before the second round of stakeholder participation, a similar process was organised by the agency IFOK but attracted only seven young participants. A special feature of RUP is its coaching programme to promote skills to change political processes. The importance and potential of such semi-formal learning environments for empowerment has been documented elsewhere (Trott 2020).

## 6. Discussion

This study investigated how young people envision the future of their region of Lusatia after the phasing out of coal mining, and the opportunities they have to express their ideas. In the following, we discuss our key findings, comparing them with existing research, using the ten dimensions of our analytical framework but combining related dimensions for clarity.

### 6.1. Power geometry, purpose, and positioning

The #MISSION 2038 and RUP programmes offer possibilities for young people to realise localised, low-budget ideas. In the policy-oriented formats (Planathon and JuFoNa – the stakeholder process for the Brandenburg Climate Plan), young people participated in a legal environment that was developed for adults without youth involvement. Consequently, there were legal barriers to youth participation. Adults determined the topics on which young people could express themselves, and the structures developed by adults often limited the integration of youth ideas into decision-making processes. Perry-Hazan (2016) describes adult reactions to children’s input as either ‘fawning or dismissing’. Our study shows that these strategies can be combined, with adults publicly praising youth input while excluding their proposals from political decision making.

Additionally, there was a lack of resources and follow-up processes to help integrate youth ideas into decision making (Shier et al. 2014). Our results differ from the findings of Andersson (2017), because in our cases a willingness by pedagogical professionals to communicate with decision makers and advocate for youth participation was insufficient to achieve political impact.

Despite these challenges, dedicated young people managed to bring their ideas to decision-making bodies, supporting Cahill and Dadvand’s (2018) claim that power in youth participation is not a static category. Furthermore, the influence of young people may grow in the future. Funding for youth participation in structural change is becoming more accessible, and progressive legislation in Brandenburg now requires project promoters and decision-making bodies to involve young people (Landtag Brandenburg 2022). Consequently, it is now the responsibility of politicians and bureaucrats to develop procedures that appeal to young people.

## 6.2. Space and place (externally, internally)

In regional transformations, the concepts of space and place are central. There are at least four dimensions to consider: the contextual and cultural shaping of the place where participation occurs; the regional, national, and international influences that participants bring; the development of a regional vision for the future; and the linkage of this vision to the transformation of individual places.

Some ideas developed by young people are likely to be realised because they align with adult-developed projects funded through federal aid for structural change (L ow Beer and G rtler 2023). These include improvements in transport, digital and business infrastructure, advancing the energy transition, and researching new technologies. However, young participants also look for projects that strengthen the local environment and promote diversity. Their vision of an inclusive Lusatia, open to people from all over the world, contrasts with the strong presence of right-wing extremism in the region. None of the service workers we interviewed reported the participation of young people with right-wing extremist positions. This indicates that the proposals and visions do not reflect the full spectrum of ideas of young people in the region.

The implementation of small projects in #MISSION2038 may shift perceptions of space among future generations by demonstrating that power can be reallocated to meet the needs of young people. This experience can redefine what is considered possible or desirable for participation in each place.

## 6.3. Power relations and processes

The methods employed by the programmes are suitable for their respective purposes, and the power relations within the programmes appear to have had little influence on them. Studies find that young people prefer issue-oriented, time-limited, project-based engagement (e.g. Etzkorn 2019). This might have guided adults in developing short-term programmes such as Planathon. However, such singular programmes seem inappropriate for the power geometries present in structural change and their long-term timeframes.

Our cases indicate that it makes a difference who designs, invites participants, and implements a programme. This may be especially true for issues that have been heavily pushed by a youth movement, such as climate change. There is a risk that frustration resulting from failed participation processes will discourage previously motivated youth from continued engagement.

## 6.4. Protection and perspective

Similarly, to other activists in the climate movement, representatives of JuFoNa and RUP express that climate activism increases their sense of agency, but that they struggle to balance the demands of activism and other spheres of life (Budziszewska and G l d 2021; Kowasch et al. 2021). Therefore, there is a need to prepare young people for not being heard, being ignored, or developing the patience necessary to pursue their concerns over extended political timescales.

Regarding *perspective*, the limited range of participants is problematic, since it highlights both a democratic deficit and a potential lack of diverse perspectives. However, this is a common problem for (youth) participation. In participation processes for adults, attempts are made to counter this problem using (stratified) random samples. The aim of stratification is to ensure that the group involved has similar characteristics (e.g. in terms of geographical distribution or the distribution of income, education, and gender) to the overall population (Bertelsmann Stiftung & Allianz Vielf altige Demokratie 2017).

A spatial approach that views youth participation as a process of negotiating space provides valuable insights into both the aspirations and opportunities of young people. By combining the perspectives of Massey (2005) and Cahill and Dadvand (2018), this study adopts a multidimensional

view, examining what occurs within a participation process, the influence of context, and what the process itself impacts.

However, this study has several limitations. While a broad range of actors were interviewed, only a few were young people, which might have affected the findings, particularly regarding internal dimensions. Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic and challenges in obtaining access prevented direct observation of the processes studied. This limited our ability to analyse the locations of the formats, as well as processes and power relations. Moreover, there was a lack of detailed data on the participants, which constrained our ability to fully characterise them. Future studies should address these gaps.

## 7. Conclusion

This study examined the opportunities and aspirations of young people in shaping local spaces during the coal phase-out in Lusatia, eastern Germany, focusing on four participatory processes. We combined Massey's (2005) concept of space with Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) P7 model for youth participation.

We found that young people's aspirations align with adult-developed projects in areas such as transport, digital and business infrastructure, the energy transition, and new technologies. However, youth call for a more ambitious ecological transformation, broader application of digital solutions, and prioritisation of democratic decision making and participation.

There is a significant discrepancy, particularly in policy-oriented processes, between the proclaimed purposes of the four formats and the limited opportunities provided for young people to have an impact. While the processes are internally well-designed to produce good results and empower participants, external power relations and problematic structures hinder young people from voicing their concerns publicly and making meaningful contributions to policy. Despite this, some formats allowed young people to reposition themselves, highlighting the fluidity of power. Nevertheless, youth also express frustration at their limited impact, but see no alternative to their engagement through these channels.

The findings underscore the importance of researching youth participation from a spatial perspective, and call for better preparation of both young participants and policymakers to manage expectations and responsibilities in participatory processes. Effective youth participation requires adults to not only provide space but to also commit to change.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendices

### A1: List of Interviews

Interview Code	Date	Interviewee Category	Relation to programme / youth participation
A	17.03.2023	Organiser / Youth service worker	JuFoNa
B	28.03.2023	Organiser / Youth service worker	RUP
C	10.05.2023	Organiser / Youth service worker	Planathon
D	26.05.2023	Participant	Planathon
E	31.05.2023	Participant	Planathon
F	27.10.2022	Organiser / Youth service worker	Youth Participation Brandenburg
G	03.11.2022	Participant	#MISSION2038
H	03.11.2022	Organiser / Youth service worker	#MISSION2038
I	07.11.2022	Organiser / Youth service worker	#MISSION2038
J	11.11.2022	Organiser / Youth service worker	JuFoNa
K	17.11.2022	Politician	Youth Participation, Saxony
L	22.11.2022	Politician	Youth Participation, Brandenburg
M	21.1.2021	Politician	Youth Participation, Brandenburg
N	18.1.2021	Organiser / Youth service worker	Youth participation actor, Brandenburg
O	11.2.2021	Organiser / Youth service worker	#MISSION2038
P	12.2.2021	Organiser / Youth service worker	#MISSION2038
Q	14.2.2021	Organiser / Youth service worker	Youth participation actor, Brandenburg

### A2: Interview guide with youth service workers (adapted to the respective format)

Dimension	Interview questions (translated)
Power geometry	- How did Format X come about?- What were the important stages in the development of Format X?- Who is involved in Format X?- Who supported Format X politically and administratively?- What happened/happens to the results of Format X? (If applicable, which of the proposals were implemented?)
Purpose	- Why was Format X founded?- Have the goals of Format X changed over the years?- What do you think is the motivation of politicians for involving young people in structural change?
Positioning	- What tasks did the young people have in Format X? (Follow-up questions: What topics were the young people asked to comment on? What suggestions were they allowed to make? What was already fixed in the process, or on which issues was no participation of young people planned?)- How were the positions of young people included in Format X?- How are the results of Format X dealt with at federal, state, and municipal level?- Which parts of the participation process were particularly challenging for young people? How were these handled?
Space Perspective	- What visions do young people have for their region?
Perspective	- Can you please describe the group of participants in Format X (age, household income, level of education, political positions).- Was socio-economic data collected?- How were the young people who took part in Format X selected?- (If applicable) How could a more diverse selection be achieved?
Power relations	- What content-related disputes were there in Format X? How were these disputes dealt with?- What disputes were there between and within the different status groups, e.g. young people, facilitators?
Protection	- Was/is there a protection system against discrimination and violence?- What costs were covered for the participants in Format X?- Did young people drop out of the programme?
Place – I	- In your opinion, does it make a difference – in terms of processes, results, and contexts – that Format X was carried out in Lusatia?- Are there historical, social, and political particularities of Lusatia to which the participation process was adapted?
Process	- What methods were used for Format X?- What worked well? What worked less well?
Empowerment	- How did the young people perceive their contribution?- What did the young people learn from Format X?

The structure of the interviews with young people and politicians was similar, however the questions were adapted significantly.

### A3: Code tree of parent codes and sub-codes

Procedure Notes: The code tree is derived from content analysis (Mayring 2014) of the interviews. First, the material was analysed using our analytical questions (deductive procedure). Second, the material was open-coded (inductive procedure). Third, the created codes were merged to form the final code tree.

